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Adaptation and its Discontents

By Thomas Leitch

Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2007. ISBN: 978-0801885655 (hbk). 354 pp. £36.50 (hbk).

A Review by Sarah Artt, Queen Margaret University, UK

As the area of adaptation studies enjoys a vogue (2007 saw the launch of two dedicated academic journals: Intellect's *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* and Oxford University Press's *Adaptation*) it is fitting that one of its great champions as an area worthy of study for both English and Film Studies, Thomas Leitch, has published a substantial work outlining new directions for the field in terms of both teaching and research. The introductory chapter is a powerful and convincing call for literacy as agency and argues that adaptation studies fulfills a crucial role in teaching, that screen adaptations function "as illustrations of the incessant process of rewriting as critical reading" (16). He is keen to point out that "this approach to adaptation study treats both adaptations and their originals as heteroglot texts rather than as canonical works, emphasizing the fact that every text offers itself as an invitation to be rewritten" (16). Leitch sees this approach as fundamental in terms of teaching students how to read critically when tackling novels, an approach that is equally applicable in teaching students how to watch films critically. Leitch's suggestion of a new discipline of textual studies is very appealing, encompassing a wide range of approaches in the humanities -- "the study of how texts are produced, consumed, canonized, transformed, resisted and denied" (17) -- as is his assertion that adaptation studies is the logical bridge between literacy (in the sense of the ability to read and think critically) and literature, that is, the skills we attempt to teach our students and the texts we ask them to engage with.

Chapter two looks at adaptation in early cinema, particularly the one-reelers of D.W. Griffith, as well as early adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. Leitch argues that these films, though short by today's standards, can still efficiently evoke an adapted narrative or even events on a grand scale through the use of cinematic technique. This neatly dispenses with the argument often levelled particularly at film adaptations of classic novels, that even a feature length film of two hours or more does not contain enough time or space to adapt the complexities of the classic novel. Griffith, the great master of the early epic,

uses "the cachet of history rather than literature to imply epic scale within twelve minutes" (38), a technique he was to deploy later in his feature-length work. Chapter three is devoted, rather intriguingly, to the Biblical epic, with a particular focus on Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). In his discussion of notions of fidelity and the biblical epic, Leitch argues, "the worst that can happen to an unfaithful adapter of Scripture is accusations of heresy or blasphemy (though these are still a healthy step up from being tortured by the Inquisition)" (52). He then continues with a fascinating discussion around *The Passion of the Christ* and notions of 'fidelity' to the New Testament. In this chapter Leitch reimagines the whole notion of fidelity to the source text by aligning it with the idea he introduces in the first chapter, that all texts invite rewriting, or in the case of the Gospels, "the exemplary text must be shattered before it can be used" (66), meaning that selections must be made, and restructuring must occur in order to make a coherent film on this subject.

Chapter four deals with Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* as one of the most regularly adapted works in English literature. Leitch's survey of adaptations is impressively exhaustive, encompassing everything from early silents to *The Muppets Christmas Carol* (Brian Henson, 1992), which he praises for its playful self-reflexivity. An acknowledged classic text of literature that most of us regard as happily subsumed in perennial adaptations for the festive season, Leitch is keen to discuss the cultural uses of *A Christmas Carol* in terms of the form of apology normally reserved for less than inspiring adaptations, that at least the film may introduce new or young readers to a classic literary text (68). He also dwells on the perceived universal values conveyed by Dickens's text, the ideas of compassion and conversion.

Chapter five delves more deeply into adaptation theory and the much-discussed categories of adaptation put forth by Geoffrey Wagner and Dudley Andrew, and more recently by Kamilla Elliott. Leitch in turn revisits Genette's discussions of the varieties of textuality in light of previous categorisation for adaptation, which Leitch sees as predominantly evaluative (95). Leitch then goes on to explain and introduce ten strategies for adaptation. One such example is *adjustment*, the most frequently deployed approach in Leitch's view, which he breaks down even further into subcategories of: compression (the Victorian portmanteau novel in two hours); expansion (films based on

shorter works, stories or even songs); correction (the rectification of flaws or inconsistencies in the source); updating (the ever popular resetting of Shakespeare's plays in a contemporary high school); and latterly a comment on the important influence of a 'house style', whether that of the Gainsborough studio or a production team like Merchant Ivory, and how style can shape an adaptation to particular criteria, such as budget and genre. Leitch's category of *metacommentary or deconstruction* is perhaps what might be called a more recent entry to the field, most aptly illustrated by films like Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002), or even the more recent *A Cock and Bull Story* (Michael Winterbottom, 2005), which imagines the intricacies and difficulties of adapting *Tristram Shandy*, alongside a behind-the-scenes mockumentary of the making of the film. The final category of adaptation that Leitch identifies is *allusion*, and he is quick to point out that all films contain allusion, particularly when one considers cinematic techniques and shots that are replicated from earlier films. However, Leitch engages in a detailed breakdown of the ways in which Baz Luhrman's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) engages with all the categories he has just so carefully identified, as an illustration of how categorisation and terminology in adaptation continue to be, as he so aptly puts it, "embarrassingly fluid"(123).

Chapter six deals with the debate that continues to plague adaptation studies, the issue of fidelity to the source text. Leitch's take on this is to discuss instances of what he terms "exceptional fidelity" in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) adaptations, whose extended DVD releases, Leitch argues, have displaced the primacy of the theatrical cut. Leitch indicates that Tolkien's trilogy is much less easy to pin down in terms of its source text, as Tolkien's other works like *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit* act as intertexts and enhancements to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. It is this multitude of texts, argues Leitch, which problematise the notion of what one is supposed to be faithful to when making an adaptation.

Chapter seven allows us to revisit the well-trodden "tradition of quality" adaptation, the reputation for a particular kind of filmmaking built up over the years by the BBC in the UK, and by channels like PBS in the US, that indicate a particular set of guidelines and expectations for the classic novel adaptation, particularly on television. To this, Leitch also adds "Hollywood adaptations from the first two decades of synchronized sound...and the films produced by

Ismail Merchant and directed by James Ivory" (153). The Hollywood adaptations Leitch focuses on are seen as distinctly middle class in their values and problems (Hitchcock's adaptation of Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1940) is cited extensively). The discussion of Merchant Ivory is more illuminating, as Leitch states, quite rightly, that much of Merchant Ivory's oeuvre has been dismissed or ignored, due to their ability to find "earlier works that address contemporary problems with a decorum of manners, visuals and music that will make them seem palatable, even seductive -- so seductive that many commentators have dismissed them to concentrate on the décor" (171). Leitch argues that particularly in the case of contemporary television adaptations, the notion of quality can be easily evoked, provided a programme has the right sort of location (exotic) and style (sumptuous/realistic).

Chapter eight deals with the often overlooked status of illustrated novels and picture books and how certain illustrations have assumed a canonical status, such as Tenniel's illustrations for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, where some drawings are replicated in the mise-en-scene of numerous screen adaptations. Leitch goes on to discuss the difficulty of adapting picture books, or even the work of cartoonists whose work is not strictly narrative, and though he does claim "there are of course no film adaptations of such collections" (187), there are the St. Trinians films, based on the rather elliptical cartoons of Ronald Searle, as well as the silhouette animation films of Lotte Reiniger, whose visuals are intimately related to the words of the narrative. His implication that adapting a picture book to the screen will never be the same as "a child's private, interactive experience of having a picture book read aloud by a specific reader" fails to account for films which attempt to incorporate this experience, such as *The Princess Bride* (Rob Reiner, 1987) and Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* (1984). Leitch's discussion rings truest in his analysis of comic book adaptations, particularly the series of Batman films since 1989, whose dark cityscape, so praised by critics, was not nearly as carefully adapted from any of the comic book versions as some might have imagined. He also discusses *Sin City*'s (Robert Rodriguez, 2005) fetish for fidelity, which replicated individual comic book panels, though as Leitch points out, Miller's drawing style was already highly cinematic, influenced by the look of film noir.

Chapter nine, much like the chapter on Dickens, deals with one of the most frequently adapted figures, Sherlock Holmes. Again, Leitch unearths some surprising examples of adaptation in this vein, in particular the antic *The Mystery of the Leaping Fish* (Christy Cabanne and John Emerson, 1916) partly authored by Anita Loos, and the entertainingly bizarre *Young Sherlock Holmes* (Barry Levinson, 1985), with its memorable if implausible cult of Anubis worshippers. Leitch reserves the bulk of his analysis for the two most iconic screen performances of Holmes: Basil Rathbone and Jeremy Brett. Leitch argues that Holmes, like the mythic heroes described by Joseph Campbell, is endlessly resurrected to instill order, and that "adaptations of Holmes aim to present a Holmes more definitive than Conan Doyle's" (231).

In his discussion of adapter as auteur, Leitch ranges across the work of several British and American filmmakers: Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, and perhaps surprisingly, Walt Disney. Where Hitchcock carefully exhibited his public image as auteur through cameos and through his introductions to the television series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1962), Kubrick became increasingly and notoriously reclusive, building his own mysterious aura. Walt Disney, by masterminding a global, corporate empire that commodifies the classic narratives of childhood, is auteur to the sanitised accounts of fairy tales rendered by the Disney studio.

One of the most interesting categories established in this book is Leitch's discussion of what he terms 'postliterary adaptations', films which derive their inspiration from something other than a "text", which allows Leitch to discuss films based on videogames and this will hopefully serve as a way of exploring this field in greater detail. Leitch concludes his book with a discussion of films "based on a true story". This covers a broad range of cinematic territory, ranging from the historical, revisionist Western to films which chronicle relatively recent events, such as Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006). Leitch's claim that "not only does 'a true story' have no authors or agents to be recompensed, but its authority can never be discredited" (289) does not wholly account for debates that have surrounded texts like *In Cold Blood* (Richard Brooks, 1967), or even films as varied as *Erin Brockovich* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000), and *Stone of Destiny* (Charles Martin Smith, 2008). Leitch's final analysis is reserved for the work of certain prominent American directors -- Oliver Stone, Sidney Lumet, Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg

-- who are all concerned with depicting different aspects of what they see as the truth of the American experience.

Overall, the book covers an extremely broad range of topics in adaptation, though many of the chapters are entirely discreet. The opening call for literacy is picked up at the end of the final chapter, and certainly the breadth of Leitch's analysis, as well as his determination to set before us adaptations which have been previously ignored or denigrated, is a powerful argument for the continuing relevance of adaptation as a field of study within both film and literature.